

Druids with Class

By Skip Williams



Many players think the druid belongs out in the wilderness, where she can frolic with the animals and work magic suited for the outdoors. To such people, a druid in a city or a dungeon seems as out of place -- and about as useful -- as a speedboat in the desert. As is often the case, popular opinion about the druid isn't completely wrong, but it fails to grasp the character's true potential.

The Pros and Cons of a Druid

The druid's many abilities make for a versatile and powerful character who can excel in almost any surroundings.

Druid Assets

When you chose a druid, you gain access to many spells that affect plants and animals, but the class offers other potent spells and useful powers as well. Below are several assets you have going for you when you play a druid.

- **Animal Companion:** At 1st level, a druid has an animal ally that trusts her implicitly and generally obeys her orders. As the druid advances in level, the animal becomes even more powerful.
- **Nature-Related Abilities:** Even a beginning druid can influence animals and get along in the wild. As she progresses in level, she gains additional abilities that improve her movement through natural terrain, allow her to resist natural venom, and eventually even negate the ravages of time.
- **Wild Shape:** Beginning at 5th level, the druid can assume some animal forms. Depending on the exact shape she chooses, she can improve her mobility, fighting power, stealth -- or even all three. Additional druid levels allow her to wild shape into smaller and larger animals, and eventually into potent elemental forms as well.
- **Good Fortitude and Will Saves:** A druid uses the best save progression in the game for Fortitude and Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural mental and physical strength helps her resist most effects that fool her mind, assault her spirit, or attack her body -- including charms, compulsions, illusions, fear, polymorphing, poisons, and even disintegration. Furthermore, the high Wisdom score that a druid needs for her spellcasting also gives her Will save a hefty boost. Few other classes can match a druid's saving throw bonuses.
- **Good Spell Selection:** The druid spell list is packed with spells that manipulate energy or the natural world, such as *entangle*, *warp wood*, *produce flame*, *chill metal*, *heat metal*, *call lighting*, *stone shape*, and *flame strike*. Many of these spells are useful for attacking foes, and others provide handy abilities on a temporary basis. The druid also has access to lifesaving spells such as *slow poison*, *neutralize poison*, *remove disease*, and the ever-popular *cure* spells. In addition, she can cast defensive spells, spells that bolster her allies, and spells that summon aid. Best of all, she has access to the whole druid spell list, not just the spells that she can place in a spellbook or master for a personal spell list.
- **Spontaneous Spells:** A druid can spontaneously convert any spell she has prepared into a *summon*

nature's ally spell. This ability allows her to load up on attack or utilitarian spells and still conjure up help if she needs it.

- **Good Hit Points:** The druid's 8-sided Hit Dice give her a fairly impressive hit point total.
- **Good Attack Bonus:** A druid's base attack bonus -- +3 per four levels -- is second only to that of the more martial classes, such as the fighter. So if your druid decides to enter combat, she can make a pretty good showing.

Druid Weaknesses

The druid's many advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a druid character.

- **Mediocre Weapon Selection:** The druid is proficient with only a limited array of simple and martial weapons that fit the druidical ethos. Her selection includes a few very serviceable weapons, but they're not the most deadly ones available.
- **Mediocre Armor Class:** The druid has access to defensive spells such as *barkskin* that improve her Armor Class, and to spells such as *stoneskin* that can help her withstand damage. However, she is proficient with only light and medium armor, plus all shields (except tower shields). To make matters worse, her armor and shield cannot be made from metal. These limitations still allow her a decent personal defense, but her Armor Class definitely isn't the best, and she's likely to suffer for it during any prolonged battle.
- **Poor Reflex Saving Throws:** Druids have the worst progression for Reflex saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, they aren't so great at getting out of the way when things get rough.

Playing a Classy Druid

Great druids usually use the following techniques. So if you're playing a druid, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

Thinking Ahead

As a druid, you have to make many of your most important decisions before an adventure begins. Your daily spell preparation has a big effect on how you play your character and what your party can expect to accomplish on any given day. Many of your most effective spells work to best advantage only when you're outdoors in a natural setting. So if you're getting ready for an underground adventure or one in an urban setting, avoid spells such as *entangle* and *call lightning*. Keep in mind, however, that some of your spells can work well even when others don't. Most fantasy cities, for example, are well populated with animals that you can interrogate via the *speak with animals* spell, and most dungeons are made of stone, which offers numerous ways to use the *stone shape* spell.

Your wild shape ability gives you considerable flexibility, and it pays to plan how best to use it before you actually need it. If your group needs extra fighting power, consider animal forms that are useful for combat, such as wolves or bears. Smaller forms, such as bats or birds, are good for stealth and scouting.

In any case, plan to stay close to the action so that you can intervene with a spell or physical attack when necessary. You're fairly hardy compared with other characters, and your group can easily go down to defeat if you're timid when the going gets tough. But you don't always have to place yourself in the line of fire; your animal

companion can often act as a stand-in for you when some physical action is required.

Your Friends are Your Best Weapons

You can have a big impact on the game by working through others, so be prepared to lend your support whenever you can.

Natural Allies: Spells such as *barkskin*, *magic fang*, and *animal growth* are great ways to improve your animal companion or give a boost to a creature that you've summoned. But don't go overboard; your allies might become annoyed if you invest too many spells in your animal companion -- especially healing spells.

The Party's Main Fighter: A single *cure light wounds* or *cure moderate wounds* spell can keep a fighting character going, ultimately dealing more damage to the enemy than any of your other spells can. If you have no healing spells prepared, consider using a *summon nature's ally* spell to help take the heat off your party's front line. Your animal companion can lend some aid as well.

The Party's Scout: Stealthy characters such as rogues, rangers, and monks often get in over their heads. Your wild shape ability lets you stage a quick rescue or even unobtrusively tag along to lend a hand if needed.

Other Spellcasters: You probably have more hit points and a better attack bonus than the other spellcasters in your group, and your Armor Class is likely better than that of any arcane spellcaster in the party, except possibly a bard. So try to stay close enough to your fellow spellcasters that you can protect them if a foe breaks through the front line.

Whenever possible, try to coordinate your daily spell choices with the other spellcasters in your group. Your spell selection is almost certainly broader than theirs, so be ready to fill any gaps. Useful spells such as *speak with animals* and *water breathing* are probably best provided by you, since you can swap them for *summon nature's ally* spells if they're not needed.

Wild Shape with Care

Assuming a wild shape interferes with your ability to use weapons and tools and with your ability to speak to your fellow adventurers. It also keeps you from casting spells unless you have the Natural Spell feat. For all these reasons, wild shape is not an ability to use frivolously -- your best bet is to stay in your natural form until you need to assume another one.

Some Key Equipment

A druid's gear is nearly as important to her as her spells, so don't neglect it. Below are some essential pieces to pack.

- **Armor:** Plan to buy the best armor you can afford (typically hide armor for a druid) and carry a heavy wooden shield as well -- you'll never regret having a formidable Armor Class. And don't overlook other defensive items you can wear, such as *rings of protection*. An *amulet of natural armor* can also prove useful, but it won't work with a *barkskin* spell. Several lesser items whose benefits stack give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item.
- **Melee Weapon:** You're pretty good in combat, so be prepared to fight. A scimitar or spear packs the most

punch.

- **Ranged Weapon:** A sling or dart can prove as effective as a low-level attack spell against some opponents. Use them when you need to conserve your spells or when the opposition isn't threatening enough to merit spell use.
 - **Backup Spells:** You never know when you'll run out of spells. Furthermore, you never know when you'll need a particular spell -- and need it very badly. So it pays to keep some spellcasting power in reserve via a collection of scrolls, wands, or both. Scrolls are a great way to carry along useful spells (such as *soften earth and stone*, *dispel magic*, or *remove disease*) that you might not use in every adventure. Best of all, if you have the Scribe Scroll feat, you can make scrolls yourself, though doing so uses up time, money, and experience points. Wands are useful for bread-and-butter spells that you use often, especially healing spells such as *cure light wounds*.
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About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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